

# Spengler's Tract Against Liberalism

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THE new book by Oswald Spengler is not an historical work.\* It is a tract for the times. The sudden descent of the most aloof philosopher of the age into the arena of controversy, where he evinces a passionate hatred of radical and liberal reform, will puzzle the more timid reactionaries, as it has already moved the liberals to a disgusted repudiation of Spengler and all his works. Mr. Lewis Mumford, writing in *The New Republic*, announced that he had disinfected himself and put on rubber gloves before he began his review. This, I believe, should give us pause; what offends Mr. Mumford is likely to contain something valuable. It will be difficult, however, to disentangle the truth of Spengler's diagnosis of the needs of modern civilization from the bellicose pro-Germanism of his point of view. As early as the second volume of *The Decline of the West*, Spengler had said, speaking of the passing of Culture into the dead form of Civilization: "For us this development has now set in, and as I see it, it is Germany that is destined, as the last nation of the West, to crown the mighty edifice."

There is no space here to review Spengler's philosophy of history, but I think it is necessary, if we are to understand *The Hour of Decision*, to keep clearly

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in mind the meaning that Spengler attaches to two of his conceptions, in the first volume of *The Decline of the West*. These conceptions are: the Morphology of History and the Physiognomic Tact of one's approach to historical forms. His cultural parallelism, a familiar doctrine by now, does not concern us here; it may or it may not support the validity of his insight into the meaning of our own culture. His Morphology, however, is very much to the point; it roots out our three hundred years' growth of causal history, and substitutes for it a doctrine of organism, under which the development of a culture proceeds plantwise, from birth to decay. Physiognomic Tact is thus the special kind of insight, radically different from historical mechanism, necessary to a deep apprehension of the Morphology.

In this view the forms of Western culture rose out of the anonymous peasantry surviving the collapse of Rome. The peasantry, being anonymous, is eternal, vegetative and undifferentiated, rooted in nature, the source of the high styles of Culture. (It has not seemed necessary to indicate Spengler's familiar distinction between Culture and Civilization, the latter being the character of our own age.) Out of this matrix of the soil two differentiations take place, Nobility and Priesthood, the men of action and the men of thought, checked and balanced by each other. Although Spengler maintains that these prime differentiations of the soil are universal at the beginning of all cultures, what concerns us is the modification of the prime forms in Western civilization; for this modification with us has taken on elaborations that are previously unknown.

Into the high style of the two estates, Nobility and Priesthood, the Third Estate, or the Middle Class, inserts itself; but, being essentially outside the great style, the Middle Class never achieves the true inwardness of the style, never gets "in form", and its cultural life is parasitic, limited to aimless accumulation, through money, of the cultural achievements of the two prime estates whose destruction is its chief purpose. The Middle Class, rising to power at the Reformation, has gradually destroyed religion by turning it into art; it has destroyed nobility by debasing style into manners, inner form into superficial taste, an inevitable result of the substitution of money-economics for the feudal concrete sense of destiny resting upon the peasant soil. At the height of this historical process (we are now at the height) comes Civilization, the hardening of the forms of Culture, the replacement of the concrete life of the soil by abstract intellect which in the realm of the spirit moves towards science and, in economics, towards finance-capitalism.

The Middle Class achieves its purpose by building great cities, in which the rootless intellect thrives. "The sly-shrewdness of the country and the intelligence of the megalopolis are forms . . . between which reciprocal understanding is scarcely possible." Again:

The city assumes the lead and control of economic history in replacing the primitive values of the land, which are forever inseparable from the life and thought of the rustic, by the *absolute idea of money* as distinct from goods. . . . Money has become, for man as an economic animal, a form of the activity of the waking-consciousness, having no longer any roots in Being. This is the

basis of its monstrous power over every beginning Civilization, which is always an unconditional *dictatorship of money*, though taking different forms in different cultures. This is the reason, too, for the want of solidity, which eventually leads to its losing its power and its meaning, so that at last, as in Diocletian's time, it disappears from the thought of the closing Civilization, and the primary values of the soil return anew to take its place.

The question that these glimpses of Spengler's historical doctrine raise, in connection with *The Hour of Decision*, is chiefly this: How can Spengler's organic determinism be reconciled with the call to arms that he now shouts to the white races, particularly the Teutonic peoples, to repel the twin revolutionary menace of the dark races and of the proletariat? I think this part of the new Spengler book may be dismissed as so much Teutonic jingoism. In the violent attack on communism and other phases of the international revolutionary movement, Spengler forgets the schematism of *The Decline of the West*, and falls into a kind of "rugged individualism" when he praises here and there the responsible man who by zeal and foresight builds a factory or a fortune.

Apart from these lapses, springing doubtless from anxiety for the recovery of Germany, *The Hour of Decision* condenses into a brief outline the entire philosophy of history that Spengler has constructed in the last twenty-five years: the application is wholly contemporary, and it can be ignored only by the liberal-communist group in America because this group cannot afford to heed it.

"Capitalism and Socialism are both of an age, in-

timately related, produced by the same outlook and burdened with the same tendencies. Socialism is nothing but the capitalism of the lower classes." This passage, I think, might have been written by any thorough critic of the capitalist system in England and America, for to be a thorough critic of capitalism is to be also a critic of the socialist movement. Spengler points out that the finance-capitalist, the manipulator, is ignored by communist theory, which divides the economic world into two fictitious classes, employer and worker. The entrepreneur is ignored because the theory of socialist dictatorship is an imitation of the money-dictatorship of the present order. Spengler says: "Finance-Socialists and trust magnates like Morgan and Kreuger correspond absolutely to the mass-leaders of Labour parties and the Russian economic commissars: dealer-natures with the same parvenu tastes." Not only is the finance-capitalist ignored; peasantry and craftsmen, and those numerous classes that were, until after the French Revolution, firmly rooted in the institution of property, are either drawn into the fictitious category of Worker or actually exterminated as in Russia. For the Liberals and Socialists "the peasantry had ceased to exist", with the result, in our time, of an active hostility of the city proletariat to the land-worker. Men are "regarded as appurtenances to the economic situation"; history is "explained in the light of prices, markets, goods". To this theory "we owe the conception of work, not as the content of life and calling, but as the commodity in which the worker trades".

The institution of property has disappeared, as it always disappears, says Spengler, when Culture passes

into Civilization. These special terms need not concern us: what does concern us is this—that Capitalism and Socialism are simply different names for an attack on the institution of property that has now been going on since the latter part of the seventeenth century. International finance-capitalism has attacked the ownership of land and has reduced even factory production to slavery; it is the attack from above. Socialism would carry this process further; it would destroy the last trace of private property and schematize the whole function of man in the abstract money-system invented by finance capital: this is the attack from below.

It is a single attack, and those men who stand apart from it may be inclined to look upon the tragic illusion of difference between capitalism and socialism as the fatal argument of Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee. The argument of these amiable gentlemen Spengler calls the White World-Revolution. In the dim background supporting the White, there is the Coloured World-Revolution. The Liberal movement, says Spengler, has marched from Jacobinism to Bolshevism, and in the progressive abstraction of the moral nature of man into the purely economic function, the whole quality of cultural life is ignored: the "workers" everywhere in the world become abstract brothers. The integrity of Western culture, under the catchwords of Justice and Equality, is betrayed by an alliance with the Coloured Races. As European man loses his power of rule, the dark peoples rise to dispute that power. The end will probably be another Dark Age, a *fellaheen* society of economic slaves dominated by small groups who are themselves

dominated by the extreme abstractions of money-capital—a society without quality, roots, arts, or a conviction of the specifically human rôle.

But Spengler does not yield the future to that picture. We are nearing the age of the Caesars, the assertion once more of individual power, not the power of money, and now has come the hour of decision. Readers of Spengler's historical works will ask: What are we allowed to decide? The Morphology of our culture must run out until its inner form is exhausted. Although economic determinism is a fiction typical of the decline of culture, when personal destiny and power yield to forces and systems, when the living yields to the dead, there is yet organic determinism which controls the plant-like growth of culture and foresees its end. It is at this point that Spengler's German nationalism enters: it is the hour for Germany to decide whether she will take a secondary place in the "return of the Caesars" or produce Caesar himself.

In the long run it will make little difference which nation, after a century of gigantic wars, emerges with a Pax Romana. Such a century Spengler does not hesitate to predict. But the deepest question of all he leaves, as every one must leave, unanswered. Since Spengler's philosophy of history is also a philosophy of historical values enjoining us to see all "late" forms of society as a decadence from the rooted life of property and land, how far are we entitled to will and to restore those values? How shall we set about it?